

Alfred Fournier, 1832–1914

His influence on venereology

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It is now almost a hundred years since Fournier, much against the standard belief of the times, proposed that syphilis was the likely cause of *tabes dorsalis*. Alfred Fournier (Fig. 1) was unquestionably the foremost syphilologist in France in the last 30 years of the 19th century, but his life and works are little known in English-speaking countries, probably because so few of his works have been translated into English (Fournier, 1906) and because he is overshadowed on this side of the Channel by his contemporary Jonathan Hutchinson (1828–1913).



FIG. 1 *Alfred Fournier (from Darier, 1915). By courtesy of the Wellcome Trustees*

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Alfred-Jean Fournier was born in Paris on May 12, 1832, into a family with a medical background. He excelled at school at the Institution Jauffret, at the Lycée Charlemagne, and the Concours Général, throughout which he developed a love for the classics and humanities. In later years he translated the works of John of Vigo, Jacques de Béthencourt, and Fracastorius into French.

He began his medical studies on December 22, 1854, and by one of those happy chances of fate found himself attached in his first year as an intern to Ricord at the *Hôpital du Midi*. It will be remembered that Ricord (1838) had thrown out John Hunter's erroneous ideas that gonorrhoea and syphilis were part of the same disease. He also divided syphilis into primary, secondary, and tertiary stages and was credited with a vast number of *risqués bons mots* and anecdotes (Ricordiana). He was aptly described by Oliver Wendell Holmes as 'the Voltaire of pelvic literature—a sceptic as to the morality of the race in general, who would have submitted Diana to treatment with his mineral specifics and ordered a course of blue pills to the vestal virgins'.

The relationship which developed between Ricord and his pupil Fournier was to prove one of the most successful and fruitful ever to occur between medical teacher and student, the latter inheriting Ricord's private practice, marrying his daughter, and acquiring many of his master's talents for oratory, teaching, and clinical ability. Fig. 2 (opposite) shows them together over 30 years later.

Fournier's first work '*Recherches sur la contagion du chancre*' was published in 1857, and like his second major work ('*De la contagion syphilitique*', 1860), which was part of his doctoral thesis, was dedicated to Ricord. In those days, before the spirochaete had been discovered and when the Wassermann reaction was as yet unknown, his thesis, like many works on syphilis of that period, describes various types of chancre and early syphilitic eruptions with their supposed prognoses. It is interesting to

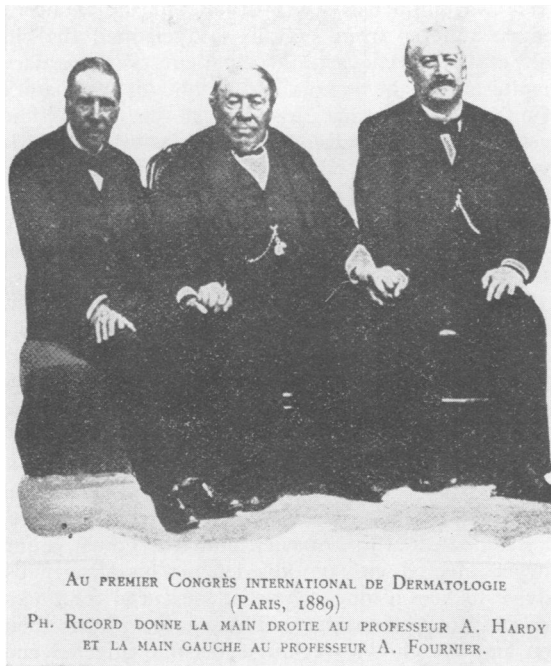


FIG. 2 Fournier with Ricord and Hardy at the First International Congress of Dermatology, Paris, 1889 (from Gougerot and Brodier, 1932)

note the motto, *Quod vidi, scripsi*, which appeared on the title page of the work of 1860.

In 1913, a year before his death, the Bibliothèque Nationale had listed 92 publications by him in France. Proksch (1889 and 1900) listed even more works, including all his articles in learned journals both in France and abroad.

After 1860, his career rapidly advanced. He wrote a thesis on uraemia (1863) for his *agrégation*; then he became involved under Jaccoud in work on gonorrhoea, and declared in 1866 that it was a quite separate form of urethritis from that which he described as simple (presumably non-specific) urethritis, saying that the former was caused by a specific virus. Of course *N. gonorrhoeae* was not described as a microbe peculiar to gonorrhoea until 1879 when Neisser used Koch's staining methods. One fallacy that Fournier believed was that only blennorrhagic (*i.e.* gonococcal) urethritis could cause rheumatism. His contemporary Emile Vidal (1825-1893) was to describe keratoderma blennorrhagica in 1893.

From 1868-1876 Fournier was *chef de service* at the *Hôpital de Lourcine*, and then until 1880 at the *Hôpital Saint Louis*, the great hospital for diseases

of the skin in Paris. Throughout this time of *la belle époque*, he gained vast clinical experience of the ravages of syphilis. He later declared how he pitied the poor public patients who had to give all their clinical details in the vast open out-patient departments of the times.

In 1873 appeared the first edition of 'Leçons sur la syphilis, étudiée plus particulièrement chez la femme'. In the *Annales de Dermatologie et de Syphiligraphie* for 1875-1876, he put forward in two articles the idea of a syphilitic origin for *tabes dorsalis* (Fournier, 1875). His propositions were that syphilis was a cause of the symptoms of paralysis, motor incoordination, and progressive locomotor ataxia, and he divided the disease into types affecting the lumbar, cranial, and optic nerves. He showed that, of thirty cases of *tabes dorsalis*, 24 had a definite syphilitic history—24 *fois sur 30, voyez quelle proportion*.

These findings, coming from a venereologist, caused much consternation, this being the time when Charcot presided over the school of neurology at the *Salpêtrière*. In fact, Charcot never came round to believing that syphilis was the cause of *tabes dorsalis*. Other eminent neurologists took sides. Westphal (1880) said it was not proved, but also that it was not probable that syphilis was the cause of *tabes*. Gowers (1892) added a cautious note, stating that 'tabes is generally although not invariably a post-syphilitic disease'. Erb became Fournier's most strenuous supporter and, from a vast study of 1,100 male cases from the upper classes, with 10,000 controls, showed that 89.5 per cent. of patients with *tabes dorsalis* had had a chancre or definite syphilis (Erb, 1892). Fournier formed the concept of *parasymphilis*, *i.e.* 'those diseases of which syphilis is essentially the cause, but which are not directly the result of the syphilitic virus, namely general paralysis, *tabes dorsalis*, *tabo-paresis*, and primary optic atrophy' (Mott, 1910).

'*La syphilis du cerveau*' (1879) gives excellent illustrations of epilepsy in tertiary syphilis, *folie syphilitique*, and the excitement and mania of general paralysis, with a beautiful description of the handwriting of patients with that disease.

Throughout this time Fournier built up a card index of 50,000 cases which were to be the source material for all his writings.

In 1879 Fournier was elected a member of the Academy of Medicine, and it was only natural that in 1880, when a clinical chair of dermatology and syphilology was set up in the faculty of medicine, it should go to Fournier who was to hold it until 1902. He was a teacher with an impressive presence, immaculately dressed with the ribbon of the Legion of

Honour in the buttonhole of his frock coat, and always courteous to both patients and pupils. Every Tuesday saw the presentation of cases and every Friday he gave his professorial lectures, on which many of his books were based. He wrote three other works devoted entirely to the neurological aspects of syphilis; 'L'ataxie locomotrice d'origine syphilitique' (1882), 'Leçons sur la période præ-ataxique du tabès d'origine syphilitique' (1885), and 'Les affections parasymphilitiques' (1894), by which time his views on the syphilitic origin of tabes dorsalis and general paralysis of the insane were universally accepted.

Apart from his writings on syphilis, Fournier also produced papers on dermatological subjects, such as the cutaneous manifestations of diabetes mellitus, vacciniiform herpes in infants, and eruptions due to antipyrin.

To list all his books on syphilis would be to give no more than a mere catalogue. The chief ones have been described by Gougerot (1932). After Diday and Hutchinson, Fournier did more than any other clinician to develop the subject of congenital syphilis and he brought order out of chaos. From 1857 to 1863 Hutchinson had described in detail in several journals all the entities now known as Hutchinson's triad. At the same time Diday and Parrot were the foremost French workers in the field of congenital syphilis. However, it was left to Fournier in 1886 in 'La syphilis héréditaire tardive', to coin the phrase 'Le triad de Hutchinson'. The next year Hutchinson (1887) dedicated his book 'Syphilis' to Alfred Fournier, 'as a small expression of friendship and high esteem'. In 'Traitement de la syphilis' (1894), may be found Fournier's aphorism for treatment, 'à maladie chronique, il faut traitement chronique'. 'Les chancres extra-génitaux', written in 1897 with his son Edmond Fournier, contains classic descriptions of every extragenital chancre.

In 1899, again with the collaboration of his son Edmond, he wrote his 'Traité de la syphilis', the quintessence of his whole life's work. It was translated into English, and an edition was published in New York.

Fournier had far more influence on venereology than his immediate work and teachings. He stated that venereology was as much a specialty as any other and that it took 10 years to train a consultant. He abhorred the fact that medical students could qualify knowing next to nothing about venereal diseases. He tried to improve the general level of undergraduate medical teaching in venereology, but in his own times, with little success. He pointed out, as have others since, what a wealth of teaching material was to be found in the Lock hospitals.

He was immensely sympathetic to the innocent female sufferer from syphilis and claimed that in half of his female syphilitic patients with tertiary manifestations he was unable to obtain any history of infection. From his early days at the *Lourcine* he had seen how syphilis affected the wives and ultimately the children of the male syphilitic. He noted what a terrible effect it had together with tuberculosis and alcoholism on the whole country, causing high infant mortality, chronic ill health, wastage of man-power, and personal disaster.

From his vast experience of the ravages of syphilis he decided that the medical profession as a whole and not just specialists must be aware of the dangers of venereal disease, and also that the intelligent layman must be informed. In 1901 he founded the 'Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale', devoted to spreading knowledge to combat syphilis.

In this work, the play '*Les avariés*' (Damaged Goods) by Eugène Brieux (1902) had great influence. It was dedicated to Fournier, and tells how a young lawyer infected with syphilis declines his physician's advice to take a long course of mercurial treatment and postpone his marriage. The young wife and their son and the child's wet-nurse become infected and family misfortune follows. Of course, in the manner of melodrama of that period, the wife's father, an influential politician, after much heartsearching, decides that public awareness of the dangers of syphilis is needed and that a certificate of freedom from syphilis must be obtained before marriage.

In his last remaining years Fournier produced several small books on the facts of life for the public, and these are much like others of their kind. His excellent advice too often evoked a facetious response from the press, as in the cartoon of 1908 which shows him involving Cupid in a pre-marital examination (Fig. 3, opposite).

The reputation of the school of dermatology at Paris in the late 19th century and the teachings of Fournier attracted dermato-venereologists from all over Europe. Amongst others who attended was Ehlers from Denmark; in later life he stated how kind Fournier had been to him and how he had become a confirmed francophile. John James Pringle (1855-1922) attributed his extraordinary command of the French language to nightly attendance at the Comédie Française for 6 months, whilst attending the clinics of Vidal and Fournier (Shelley and Crissey, 1953).

Fournier was blessed with a happy stable home, where dinner parties were held every Friday and Sunday. Here students and friends could get to know him and discuss matters of the day such as the Dreyfus affair. The meal being finished, talk would



FIG. 3 Caricature of Fournier from the periodical *Chanteclair* (1908), vol. 1, no. 9, p. 2. By courtesy of the Wellcome Trustees

continue over coffee and afterwards Fournier played with his dog Dacia or at billiards. Then he would retire to his study either to show post-graduate students his collection of early photographs of clinical conditions, or to write.

Even at the peak of his reputation Fournier had to sustain the taunts of the neurologists on the subject of tabes and general paralysis: 'M'accuser de voir la syphilis partout', souriait-il, 'moi qui passe mes journées à rétorquer l'erreur et à dire aux malades: 'Mais non mon bon ami, vous n'avez pas la syphilis!'.

Perhaps the picture that Fournier gave of himself to the world outside medicine is best described by Daudet, himself a tabetic who had fallen foul of Charcot, in the *Goncourt Journal* for April 6, 1888: 'Yesterday Leon Daudet described the domestic interior of Fournier, the son-in-law and successor of Ricord, a house always full of gaiety where at parties and dinners, they talk only about men's and women's

natural parts and where at balls young girls can read titles such as *On Chancres* on books left wide open on the tables (Becker and Philips, 1971).

Fournier died on December 25, 1914; many of his ideas on the control of syphilis had come to fruition, and they were taken up in Great Britain by the 'Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases (1916)', and in Europe after the international congresses at Brussels in 1899 and 1902, for the 'Prophylaxis of Venereal Diseases'.

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